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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0499

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL PGOV CASC IN BE

SUBJECT: DELHI DIARY, FEB 11-15

¶11. (U) Below is a compilation of political highlights from Embassy New Delhi for February 11-15, 2008 that did not feature in our other reporting, including:

-- Notice Issued to Sonia Gandhi over Belgian Honor
-- Renegade Politician Finally Breaks Ties with Congress
-- Supreme Court Seeks Stay of Gere Arrest Warrant

Notice Issued to Sonia Gandhi over Belgian Honor

¶12. (U) On February 14, the Election Commission (EC) issued a notice to Sonia Gandhi, seeking her response to a charge requiring that she be disqualified from Parliament. The complaint was filed seven months previously by an advocate, TP. Rajan from Kerala. Rajan accused Gandhi of violating the Indian Constitution for accepting the "Order of Leopold" -- the second highest civilian award in Belgium -- from the King of Belgium in 2006. According to the Indian Constitution, a Member of Parliament who acknowledges "allegiance or adherence to a foreign state" should be disqualified. The EC debated whether, by accepting this honor, Gandhi did in fact pledge allegiance to another country. Upon more research, the EC found that in becoming a Member of the Association of the Order of Leopold, one "displays an eternal devotion to Belgium and the monarchy." Unable to come to consensus on whether to disqualify Gandhi, the EC has requested a response from her and more information on the award from the Ministry for External Affairs.

¶13. (SBU) Comment: While the lawyers work out the semantics of this complaint, Gandhi has yet again opened herself up to questions of foreign allegiance. This provides good fodder for the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party to dig at her for not being of Indian origin. End Comment.

Renegade Politician Finally Breaks Ties with Congress

¶14. (U) After almost three years of bad blood, on February 13 Natwar Singh announced his resignation from the Congress Party. After the Congress Party forced Singh to resign his post as Minister for External Affairs for his involvement in the Iraq oil-for-food scandal in 2005, Singh has been a

constant thorn in Congress' side. Singh resisted resigning from the party in order to hold onto his Rajya Sabha seat. However, since 2006, he has been saddling up with Congress-haters and spewing vitriol at the Party, finally announcing his resignation at none other than a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-sponsored rally in Jaipur.

¶ 15. (SBU) Since no other party has welcomed Singh into their fold, his future remains to be seen. He has tried to knock on the door of both the Samajwadi Party and the BJP, and though they welcomed his anti-Congress sentiments neither has offered him their party designation in order to try to retain his seat in Parliament.

Supreme Court Seeks Stay of Gere Arrest Warrant

¶ 16. (U) Richard Gere's advocate asked the Indian Supreme Court to stay his three arrest warrants and transfer the cases to a court in Mumbai. The request comes in light of Gere's desire to come to India in March. The Supreme Court ordered a response from the complainants and two state governments regarding the actor's plea. The arrest warrants against Gere and Indian actress Shilpa Shetty were issued by two Rajasthan courts and one Uttar Pradesh court on April 26, 2007. The courts had issued arrest warrants after some individuals filed complaints that Gere and Shetty had violated public obscenity laws. The now infamous "kissing incident" occurred on April 15, 2007, when Gere kissed Shetty several times on the cheek during an AIDS-awareness event in New Delhi. The aim of the event was to educate truck drivers about safe-sex and AIDS. Several protests broke out in country, where mobs

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burned pictures of Shetty and beat and burned effigies of Gere.

¶ 17. (SBU) Comment: The Gere/Shetty incident highlights the churning in Indian society as it struggles between an increasingly modern India and its more traditional side. Since the incident, Shetty and Gere have both publicly apologized. End Comment.

WHITE